The Second Commandment

Exodus 20:4-6

Abstract

This study examines the Second Commandment as recorded in Exodus 20:4-6, exploring its emphasis on the manner of worship rather than merely the object of worship. While the First Commandment addresses worshipping the one true God exclusively, the Second Commandment concerns itself with worshipping God correctly and in a manner acceptable to Him. Throughout Israel's history, the misuse of images in worship proved to be a persistent and besetting sin. God's prohibition against graven images stems from His jealous zeal for proper worship, the inherent dishonor that images bring to His glory, and their tendency to mislead people into false conceptions of the true God. The commandment includes both a severe warning against those who practice idolatry and a gracious promise of covenant love to those who worship according to His revealed will. This study considers the theological foundations of the commandment, its historical context in Israel, and its continuing relevance for the Church today in both public and private worship.

Introduction

The First Commandment is brief but all encompassing: "You shall have no other gods before me." It emphasizes the importance of worshipping the one true God and does not allow for the adoption of false gods. When we come to the Second Commandment, God's emphasis is different. The Second Commandment still concerns worshipping the one true God, but its focus changes from that of the First Commandment.

In the Second Commandment, worship is still central. However, now the emphasis is on worshipping God correctly and in a manner that is acceptable to Him. In other words, God is

concerned not only that He is the object of our worship but also concerned that He is worshipped in the correct manner. These are two distinct commandments in verses 3 through 6 of Exodus 20.

My purpose for mentioning that is because historically, in the Church, particularly in Lutheran and Roman Catholic teaching, the first commandment in Exodus 20:3 is combined with the second commandment found in verses 4-6. That, however, is not appropriate as there are two distinct commands with two distinct objectives. In his book on the Ten Commandments, Thomas Watson wrote, "In the first commandment, worshipping a false god is forbidden; in the second commandment, falsely worshipping the true God is forbidden."

In summary then the second commandment addresses the importance of worshipping God according to His revealed will. All throughout the history of Israel, this was a major besetting sin. In fact, in Exodus 32 the people of Israel people fell into the sin of creating idols.

Israel's Early Violation

Exodus 32 recounts the troubling account of the golden calf. Moses did not immediately descend from the mountain. The nation of Israel grew anxious and, as was their habit, began to complain. In Exodus 32:1-6, we read that Aaron fashioned a golden calf, and the people declared, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt."

We should notice that Israel did not want to replace Jehovah completely. They wanted something that represented Him. This is what the Second Commandment absolutely forbids. Something in the fallen human heart needs to picture God, physically or mentally, in a way that is understandable. Yet God only accepts worship in the manner He prescribes in His Word. True worship comes from the heart. In fact, in Jesus' words in John 4:24, "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth,"

Sinful man by nature does not want to live by faith. He has the need for and a desire for God, because God created mankind that way, but sinful man often turns to false representations of

God. In other words, in the language of Romans 1:25, “They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.”

God has made man differently from all His other creatures. Man was made in the image of God and created to worship the Creator. There is an emptiness without worshipping the true God. The famous words of St. Augustine are very true: “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they can find rest in you.”

The Sin of Jeroboam

The problem of using images plagued Israel throughout much of its history. It was a topic the prophets of God repeatedly raised, urging repentance. After Solomon’s time, Israel was divided into two kingdoms. Jeroboam became King of the ten tribes of Israel, and Rehoboam became king of Judah.

Scripture teaches us that Jeroboam’s sins became a mark by which other kings were measured. When evaluating other kings, one question was whether they forsook Jeroboam’s sins or continued his sins. First Kings 12:25-33 records that Jeroboam was concerned that the people’s hearts would turn away from him if they went to the temple for worship. As a result, he set up two golden calves in convenient locations. By establishing these images, the King introduced a new form of worship.

In Exodus 32:4, after making the golden calf, the people were told, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.” In 1 Kings 12:28, after the two golden calves were made, Jeroboam said to the people, “Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.” We see this and other parts of the Old Testament that throughout Israel’s history, making images was a besetting sin.

The Commandment Examined

Exodus 20:4-6 reads, “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, in the earth beneath, or in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.”

We should notice the number of words in the Second Commandment. Perhaps the length implies the importance of worshipping God in a way that honors Him. It is, in fact, the longest of God’s Ten Commandments, with one exception. The Fourth Commandment to “remember the Sabbath” is slightly longer than the Second Commandment.

God could have been brief, like He is in many commandments. God could have said, “You shall not make any images,” but He expands significantly on the commandment. I would suggest He did so for our own good. Many of the commandments are very brief: “You shall not murder.” “You shall not commit adultery.” “You shall not steal.” Yet when it comes to representing God in worship, God elaborates on His command.

Ultimately, the way we worship and our thoughts about God are extremely important. Wrong conceptions of God and false worship lead to spiritual death. In Exodus 20:4-6, there are four parts of the commandment we will consider: The Rule, the Reason, the Warning, and the Promise.

The Rule

The Rule is simple: do not make any idols. The King James Version renders it, “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.” The writer of Leviticus reiterates the command in Leviticus 26:1, “Ye shall make you no idols nor graven image, neither rear you up a standing image,

neither shall ye set up any image of stone in your land, to bow down unto it: for I am the LORD your God."

A graven image, or an idol, was simply something crafted by a tool. It might have been wood, chiseled out of stone, or even metal. Regardless of the material used by the maker, the intention of having the image was, in some manner, to represent God. God's rule was don't do it, yet sadly, the scripture record shows that many in Israel did.

In fact, the archaeological record shows this as well. Recently, I had the opportunity to view an exhibit of the Dead Sea Scrolls. In case you are not familiar with the Dead Sea Scrolls, they are a collection of over 900 ancient texts written on scrolls, most of which are scriptural, discovered in 1946 in caves in Israel. Most of the texts are written in Hebrew and Aramaic.

Along with the scrolls, the exhibit featured a number of archaeological objects unearthed in ancient Israel. One of the objects consistently found in Israel was a small statue, just a few inches tall. Archeologists found over 2000 of them in various homes in ancient Israel. Those who found these figurines claim they were used as household goddesses or in worship. Now, is that accurate? I don't think we can say for sure. What we do know, however, for sure is that Israel struggled with the sinful, idolatrous practices of the neighboring Canaanite peoples. These are the same people whom God instructed Israel to destroy.

God's rule in verse 4 for not making an idol is all-encompassing. Nothing found in the sky, the earth, or the sea should be used as an image of God. Quite simply, God is saying that nothing in His Creation can represent Him. That is because the Creator is greater than all His creations.

Why Images Are Wrong

Along with the rule itself, God gives us His reasons for it. Exodus 20:4 declares, "For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God." God forbids idolatry, in part, because of His jealousy. The Westminster Larger Catechism Question 110 addresses the reasons attached to the second

commandment. It states: "What are the reasons annexed to the second commandment, the more to enforce it?" The answer is: ″The reasons, drawn from Exodus 20:5-6, highlight God's sovereignty and ownership over us, his intense zeal for proper worship, and his wrath against false worship as spiritual adultery. Violators are seen as haters of God, facing punishment across generations, while obedient lovers of God receive mercy for thousands of generations."

Like a husband and wife with a very exclusive relationship with one another that no one else can ever have, God demands exclusive worship from mankind, and in a manner He commands. He is jealous for it, but not in the sense most people today think of jealousy. Today, jealousy has a negative connotation. In this, a good substitute for the word might be zeal or zealousness. In other words, God has a strong zeal for the exclusive worship of His people.

Images dishonor God. They take away from the glory that God deserves. Any likeness of things in heaven, on the earth, in the sea is not a likeness of God. John Calvin, commenting on the Second Commandment, writes, "A true image of God is not to be found in all the world, and hence His glory is defiled and His truth corrupted by the lie whenever He is set before our eyes in a visible form. Therefore, devising any image of God is impious because by this corruption, His majesty is adulterated, and He is figured to be other than He is."

When we think about it, how arrogant it is for sinful men to think that something they create can in any way represent the eternal God. We may think it strange in our culture, but it is not uncommon in the ancient world and perhaps in some cultures today. One classic example of worship given to physical objects can be found in some forms of Hinduism. It is estimated that Hinduism is practiced by over 1.2 billion people, mainly in India, and involves widespread idol worship (known as murti puja) of deities like Shiva, Vishnu, and Ganesh in temples and homes. Devotees offer incense, food, and prayers to these statues, viewing them as conduits for a divine presence. Desperate is their need for the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In summary, idolatry clearly dishonors God, and in contrast, God's honor is fulfilled by obedience to the Second Commandment.

Images in worship terribly mislead people. They are deceitful lies promoted by the evil one. They create false ideas about God. It is a tactic of the enemy of our souls to represent God falsely. Wasn't that his tactic towards Eve in the garden? He wanted Eve to think incorrectly of God. That is what images in worship do.

Satan said to Eve in the Garden, "Did God actually say you shall not eat of any tree in the garden?" Satan is a liar and is always trying to represent God as something He is not. It is an old trick. No doubt the devil loves to see mankind create false images of God. That is also why we need the light of God's revelation in the inerrant and God-breathed Holy Scriptures.

J.I. Packer's book entitled *Knowing God* addresses this in Chapter 4, "The Only True God." In that chapter, the author discusses the Second Commandment in detail. Regarding images that mislead people, Dr. Packer explains that they are a bad attempt to make the incomprehensible God, a spirit, comprehensible. It is foolish to try.

Isaiah chapter 44:9-20 shows that not only does idolatry dishonor and mislead men, but it also shows how foolish and sinful fallen mankind really is. In clear language, the prophet expresses the foolishness of an idol and makes a mockery of those who practice idolatry. Speaking of a man who cuts down a tree, Isaiah mockingly writes, "He cuts down cedars, or he chooses a cypress tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar, and the rain nourishes it. Then it becomes fuel for a man. He takes a part of it and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Also he makes a god and worships it; he makes it an idol and falls down before it. Half of it he burns in the fire. Over the half he eats meat; he roasts it and is satisfied. Also he warms himself and says, "Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire!" And the rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, and falls down to it and worships it, He prays to it and says, "Deliver me, for you are my god!" (Isaiah 44:14-17) What foolishness!

Other prophets also ridicule images. In Jeremiah 10:5, the prophet calls idols "scarecrows in a cucumber field." He says they cannot speak; they must be carried, for they cannot walk." The prophet is stressing to us how foolish it is to think they can fashion an image of the eternal God! Over and over, the prophets of God ridicule the idols of their day, showing how utterly absurd it

is to use them as a tool for worship. At the same time, they point the people to the greatness and majesty of the true God.

The Warning

In the Second Commandment, God also gives a serious warning. Since God is a jealous God, desirous and deserving of exclusive worship, He warns those who refuse to obey. Exodus 20:5 states, "For I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me." It is very strong and sobering language. In fact, verse 5 indicates that for those who practice idolatry, God views them as those who "hate him."

Verse 5 has been and can be somewhat difficult to understand. Is God saying that the children of those who worship images will be punished for the sins of their fathers? To answer, we do well to look at other portions of Scripture. As an example, the prophet Ezekiel in Ezekiel 18:20 states, "The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father the iniquity of the son." The prophet Jeremiah seems to express the same sentiment as Ezekiel. He does so in the context of teaching on the coming of the New Covenant, in which he declares regarding God's people, "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people."

In Jeremiah 31:27-30, we find these words: "Everyone shall die for his own iniquity." This is confirmed even in the law of God found in Deuteronomy 24:16. So, how should we understand the warning in the Second Commandment?

As in any difficult passage of Scripture, we use God's whole counsel to seek to understand its meaning. We know that God is completely and perfectly just, and He always does what is right. We know from the passages we read that God will hold each person accountable for their sin.

Certainly, fathers have a significant influence on children and grandchildren, and by their example, children may indeed fall into the same sin. However, I don't think that is the full meaning of the warning in Exodus 20:5. Some commentators suggest the principle of covenant solidarity applies. Numerous scripture examples show that when the covenant head of a family sinned against God, God, in turn, often judged the whole family.

I believe the best understanding is to say that if the children continue in the idolatrous ways of their fathers, they are accountable for their sins and will receive the same punishment their fathers received. We should use this to remind parents and grandparents of the importance of setting a consistent example of God-honoring worship before the eyes of children and young people.

The Promise

Thankfully, the Second Commandment ends with a great promise. In verse 6, God expresses steadfast love to thousands of those who love Him and keep His commandments, as opposed to those who hate God by practicing worship with images.

Notice that the gracious promise of God is, in a sense, greater than the warning. The blessing does not just last 3 or 4 generations but thousands. The promise highlights the vast contrast between 3 or 4 generations and thousands. In other words, there is a vast contrast between God's judgment of the disobedient image worshipper and His gracious love for those who worship Him in His ordained manner.

The implication in the promise is that there are great blessings upon those who keep the Second Commandment and their children. They are, in fact, eternal blessings. Proverbs 20:7 states, "The righteous who walks in his integrity, blessed are his children after him."

The words "steadfast love" in Exodus 20:6 reflect God's covenantal love for His people. The promise of blessings to those who obey the commandment and to their children reflects the

covenant promise to Abraham. There, God said, “I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations as an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you” (Genesis 17:7). That is similar to the promise of the Second Commandment. Blessings now and future generations because of God’s covenant love.

The love for God mentioned in verse 6, just like the hatred for God in verse 5, is not an emotion. They are activities. They are thoughtful actions. God equates activities of obedience with love and actions of disobedience with hatred for Him.

This should immediately remind us of the words of the Lord Jesus in John 14:15, where He also defines love for Him primarily as an activity: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” If we are maturing and growing as Christians, our love for God is reflected in our willingness to obey the Word of God. That is the mark of a mature believer. Does he or she love God, as demonstrated by obeying His Word? As in the Second Commandment, great blessings come to those who do obey.

Application for the Church Today

It is valuable to discuss the Second Commandment and how it applies to the Church and individual Christians today. We must not be tempted to brush it off in our minds and say we have no desire for images or idolatry. What we need to remember is that the law is spiritual. “For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin” (Romans 7:14). We know that an idol can be more than something we can touch and see. John Calvin wrote, “The human heart is a perpetual factory of idols.” One can easily list dozens of potential idols of the heart! Love of money, sex, alcohol and drugs, fashion, beauty, and on and on.

However, the purpose of our study is to deal with matters of worship. What implications and instructions does the Second Commandment have for our public and private worship? First, we must worship according to God’s revealed will. The Lord Jesus Christ is the very heart of that will. Therefore, our worship must be Christ-centered and Christ-honoring.

Second, we must worship in Spirit and Truth. John 4:24 states that God did not reveal Himself physically to the people of Israel. The Second Commandment implies that God is a Spirit.

Third, we do not need visual aids in our worship, except for baptism and the Lord's Supper. Those two sacraments are God-ordained aids for the church. They are means of grace God has given His people.

I think the Second Commandment has much to say to those who believe that drama and dance should be part of their regular public worship. Sadly, in many situations within the evangelical church, worship now includes elements of visual representation. This is in contrast to relying on the Spirit of God to work through the preaching of the Word. It is a sad trade-off!

Of course, large segments of the "Church" worldwide maintain statues and images of the Virgin Mary, Joseph, and even Jesus. What a horrible disservice this is, and how misleading it is to those sincerely seeking to know and worship Christ.

Conclusion

The Second Commandment stands as a continuous reminder that God alone determines how He is to be worshipped. Throughout Israel's history, from the golden calf at Sinai to Jeroboam's calves in Dan and Bethel, the temptation to represent God through images proved to be a persistent snare. This commandment teaches us that God desires His people to worship Him correctly. We cannot separate loving God from obeying God. When we worship according to our own imagination rather than God's revealed will, we fundamentally misrepresent His character and rob Him of the glory He deserves. The warning is severe, visiting iniquity on the third and fourth generations of those who hate Him through disobedience. Yet the promise is abundant, showing steadfast covenant love to thousands of those who love Him and keep His commandments.

For the Church today, the Second Commandment calls us to examine carefully not only what we worship but how we worship. We must resist the constant temptation to make worship more accessible through visual representations, dramatic performances, or any human innovation that detracts from the Spirit and God's truth in worship. The gospel itself points us to the ultimate answer to this commandment. In Christ, the invisible God became visible, not to establish a pattern for images, but to accomplish our redemption. Now, through the Holy Spirit dwelling within us, we worship the Father in Spirit and in truth, without need of physical representations. Our worship must be regulated by Scripture alone, centered on Christ alone, and offered by grace alone through faith alone, all to the glory of God alone. May we heed this commandment faithfully, worshipping the Lord in the beauty of holiness, according to His Word, for His glory, and for the spiritual good of our souls and the souls of generations to come.